



**State of Tennessee
Department of State
Tennessee State Library and Archives**

**A. T. (Alexander Thomas) Robertson Family Papers,
1790-1979**

COLLECTION SUMMARY

Creator:

Robertson, A. T. (Alexander Thomas), 1814-1865

Inclusive Dates:

1790-1979, bulk 1848-1862

Scope & Content:

Papers span the period 1790-1979, although the majority is dated 1848-1862. The collection is composed of correspondence, financial records, legal documents, land records, circulars, military records, and a small number of miscellaneous items. Comprising approximately one-half of the collection is correspondence, with the majority incoming for A. T. Robertson. There are very few pieces of his outgoing correspondence and no incoming letters from either of his wives or any of his children. The papers also contain letters addressed to Robertson's brothers and law partner.

A large part of the correspondence is legal and contains letters from clients, attorneys, and out of state businesses. Most concerns routine matters pertaining to cases in which A. T. Robertson was directly or indirectly involved. The out of state businesses generally solicit his services for debt collection in Hardeman County. Attorney V. D. Barry's letters typically begin with legal business, but also offer interesting insight into historical events in Memphis, Tennessee.

In June 1850, Levin Coe, a colorful figure in Tennessee politics, was shot in a gunfight in the streets of Memphis and died of his wounds that August. Barry's letters discuss the assassination attempt and his visit with Coe in July. The correspondence also provides a first-hand account of the widespread sickness Memphis frequently experienced. Barry recounts the death of his son Charley in

the summer of 1851 and voices concern for his family during the cholera outbreak the following summer.

Financial correspondence pertains almost entirely to the repayment of debts incurred by A. T. Robertson or his brothers. These debts were most frequently notes, but include accounts for goods such as books or tin plate. In 1852, A. T. Robertson was engaged in the business of selling tin coffee pots in Hardeman County. Letters dated between February and June 1852 supply information about this endeavor, such as the wholesale cost of Remington coffee pots and reports from his salesmen. Later, A. T. ventured into the lumber business, and some letters discuss issues with the mill. In February 1862, he reported on a failed attempt to sell lumber to the Confederate army.

Personal correspondence chiefly contains letters from Robertson's brothers, extended family, friends, and business associates. Most combine news of a personal nature with business of some sort. Many of A. T.'s family members also practiced law, and their letters frequently include some discussion of legal matters. Letters from J. R. Robertson describe his work as a traveling photographer and give vivid details of a religious camp meeting he attended. A cousin's letter offers sympathy on the death of A. T.'s young son Tommy in 1857.

Harvey Ball wrote a series of letters between July and November 1854 inquiring about a teaching position at the academy in Bolivar and expressing his viewpoints on several Christian denominations and their stances on education. He comments as well on a former instructor's character. Such correspondence provides insight into the social and religious culture of the community.

Some personal correspondence provides information related to the Civil War. In November 1860, A. T.'s brother J. C. N. Robertson comments on Lincoln's election and the family's views on secession. In January 1862, his brother T. S. writes asking for advice on joining the local militia. Correspondence from business associate W. J. Davis includes observations on the February 1862 battle of Fort Donelson and Governor Harris's subsequent departure from Nashville.

A small amount of correspondence is connected with the Fentress family of Hardeman County. Included are an 1837 letter to David Fentress regarding land and an 1838 letter from David Wendell to his daughter Matilda, widow of Evander McIver, following her marriage to David Fentress. Among the correspondence are letters to or from John R. Fentress and Fanny Fentress. The collection also includes correspondence from several members of the Polk family, including J. J. Polk, E. Polk and Octavia Polk. Five letters are addressed to A. T. Robertson from J. J. Polk and concern legal matters. E. Polk's letter is personal in nature, and Octavia's letter concerns the administration of E. Polk's estate.

Financial records consist primarily of Robertson family promissory notes, receipts, and accounts. The promissory notes and receipts reflect everyday

business transactions. Most accounts are held by dry goods stores but accounts for various pharmaceuticals and toiletries are also included. The number and variety of items listed in these accounts present a picture of daily life in early to mid-19th century Tennessee.

Legal materials include bills and petitions, memoranda and notes, notices, briefs, witness statements and exhibits, wills, a deed of gift, and deed of trust. One notable item in this series is a copy of Evander McIver's will. These documents help depict the types of cases--including murder--heard in 19th century courts. Researchers can see the manner in which attorneys prepared for trial and represented their clients. Notable among the trials is that in which a slave, Dave, is accused of attempting to murder his master's wife. A. T. Robertson prosecuted this case, and countered the defense's argument that Dave was acting on the orders of his master. Because Dave did not act of his own volition, the defense argued, he was innocent.

Slavery is a topic that appears in nearly every category of the collection. Legal correspondence and documents reflect disputes over slave ownership and sales of slaves at the courthouse as well as trials for harboring runaways. Financial records include tax bills and receipts in which slaves are taxed as property. Deeds of gift and wills bequeath slaves along with other tangible property. Among these documents is an 1828 slave bill of sale from Daniel Graham to Evander McIver. Graham was Tennessee Secretary of State (1818-1830) and Register of the Treasury of the United States (1847-1848).

The remaining materials in the collection are circulars, primarily advertising law books; land records, including several deeds and surveys; a few documents related to military commissions; and miscellaneous items, i.e., recipes, newspaper clippings, one blank postcard, one negative, a short genealogical document on the Jones family, and several pages of prose.

Physical Description/Extent:

2.5 linear feet

Accession/Record Group Number:

Ac. No. 2008-132

Language:

English

Permanent Location:

V-L-4

Repository:

Tennessee State Library and Archives, 403 Seventh Avenue North, Nashville, Tennessee, 37243-0312

Administrative/Biographical History

Alexander Thomas (A. T.) Robertson was born June 26, 1814 in Giles County, Tennessee, and died October 19, 1865, in Hardeman County, Tennessee. He was the third child of Charles and Elizabeth Thomas Robertson. A. T.'s great grandfather, Col. Charles Robertson, was a delegate to the North Carolina Provincial Congress in 1775 and a member of the committee for the Watauga Petition in 1776. During the Revolutionary War, he served in Col. John Sevier's regiment and fought at the Battle of King's Mountain (1780). J. C. N. Robertson, A. T.'s uncle, fought in the First Creek War under Gen. Andrew Jackson. Following the war, he served in the 58th Regiment of Tennessee Militia, rising to the rank of brigadier general. In 1823, J. C. N. was elected the first sheriff of Hardeman County; in 1834, he was elected a member of the state Constitutional Convention.

Robertson's eight siblings included seven brothers and one sister. Three brothers were farmers – William R., Patrick F. and Theophilus S. – while the remaining four had professional occupations. As a Primitive Baptist minister, John Montgomery Carroll Robertson traveled extensively throughout Tennessee, Arkansas, and Texas. Joseph R. was both a minister and an attorney and also worked as a traveling photographer. Charles Sevier Robertson worked as an attorney, a teacher, and a farmer, while Julius Caesar Nichols Robertson was a physician.

In 1818, A. T. moved with his family from Giles County to present day Franklin County, Alabama, and in 1827, from Alabama to Hardeman County, Tennessee. In 1835, he married Elizabeth Ward, in Panola County, Mississippi. While living there, A. T. and Elizabeth had two children, Charles Lafayette and Martha Ann; Charles died before reaching the age of three.

By the summer of 1841, the family was living in Poinsett County, Arkansas. Their stay, however, was brief and unhappy. Francis Elizabeth was born in the summer of 1841, but she died not long after turning two. Twin daughters, Naomi and Nancy, were born in January 1844, but tragedy struck the family again when A. T.'s wife, Elizabeth, died on April 10 of that same year. A. T. moved his family back to Hardeman County, Tennessee, where Naomi died in August 1844.

In November 1845, A. T. married Martha Jane Vaden. They settled in Bolivar (Hardeman County), and their first child, Woodson Vaden, was born in 1846. Six more children were born between 1848 and 1863. Tommie and Sallie both died at the age of one; Woodson and Joseph died at twenty-six. Two others, Alice and

Laura, lived to be seventy-one and eighty-eight, respectively. Laura was a great grandmother of the collection's donor.

By 1848, A. T. had begun practicing law in Bolivar. During his career, he worked in partnership with G. W. Hardin and later, with his brother, J. R. Most of the cases A. T. handled were civil ones, but his legal papers include documents related to criminal trials as well. He was primarily a defense attorney, but also served as prosecutor. In addition to his law practice, A. T. engaged in at least two other side businesses. In 1852, he was involved in the business of selling tin coffee pots. He purchased the coffee pots wholesale and hired men to sell them throughout Hardeman County. Letters indicate that the business was not very successful, and it appears to have been short-lived. Approximately ten years later, A. T. was involved in a lumber business which included both the milling and sale of lumber.

In addition to his legal practice, A. T. was active in the community. He was a Freemason and was associated with the educational institutions in Bolivar. In 1859, he was elected an honorary member of the Apollonian Society at Union University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. He also served as a commissioner of the Nashville & Southern Railroad. On August 10, 1861, he was mustered in to the 22nd Tennessee Infantry Regiment at Trenton, Tennessee, with the rank of first lieutenant. He tendered his resignation and left service October 10, 1861, having been promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel. A. T. returned to Bolivar and remained there until his death in 1865.

Organization/Arrangement of Materials

Arranged alphabetically by document type, then chronologically within the folders.

Conditions of Access and Use

Restrictions on Access:

No restrictions.

Restrictions on Use and Reproduction:

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Index Terms

Personal Names:

Coe, Levin Hudson, approximately 1807-1850
Fentress, David, 1794-1855
Graham, Daniel, 1789-1869
McIver, Evander, 1795-1828
Robertson, A. T. (Alexander Thomas), 1814-1865

Subjects:

Criminal courts -- Tennessee -- 19th century
Lumber and lumbering -- Tennessee -- 19th century
Slaveholders -- Tennessee -- 19th century
Slaves -- Tennessee -- 19th century

Geographic Names:

Bolivar (Tenn.) -- Social life and customs -- 19th century
Giles County (Tenn.) -- Social life and customs -- 19th century
Hardeman County (Tenn.) -- Social life and customs -- 19th century
Memphis (Tenn.) -- Social life and customs -- 19th century
Poinsett County (Ark.) -- Social life and customs -- 19th century
Tennessee -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865 -- Sources

Document Types:

Accounts
Bills of sale
Briefs (legal documents)
Circulars
Correspondence
Deeds
Military commissions
Negatives (photographic)
Newspaper clippings
Postcards
Promissory notes
Receipts (financial records)
Recipes
Tax stamps
Wills

Acquisition and Appraisal

Provenance and Acquisition:

The papers were a gift of Kenneth Eugene Savage Sr.

Processing and Administrative Information

Preferred Citation:

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Tennessee State Library and Archives

Processing Information:

Completed by Marie Stroop and Susan Gordon in March 2013.

Electronic Location and Access:

<http://www.tn.gov/tsla/history/manuscripts/findingaids/2008-132.pdf>

DETAILED COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

CONTAINER LIST

Contents/Item Title	Date	Box	Folder
Articles of agreement -- Robertson, A. T.	1843	1	1
Bills of sale -- Slave	1828, 1852, undated	1	2
Circulars	1848-1854, 1856-1857, undated	1	3
Correspondence -- Envelopes	1837-1861, undated	1	4
Correspondence -- Financial	1828, 1834, 1837, 1848, 1850-1854, 1857, 1859	1	5
Correspondence -- Financial -- Robertson Family	1852, 1853, 1857	1	6
Correspondence -- Financial -- Robertson, A. T.	1844, 1848- 1851	1	7
Correspondence -- Financial -- Robertson, A. T.	1852	1	8
Correspondence -- Financial -- Robertson, A. T.	1853-1856	1	9
Correspondence -- Financial -- Robertson, A. T.	1857-1862, undated	1	10
Correspondence -- Financial -- Robertson, A. T. and G. W. Hardin	1854	2	1
Correspondence -- Financial -- Robertson, A. T. and J. R.	1859	2	2
Correspondence -- Financial -- Robertson, J. R.	1858-1861	2	3
Correspondence -- Financial -- Robertson, T. S.	1850	2	4
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Correspondence -- Legal	1849-1855, 1858-1861, 1894, undated	2	6
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Correspondence -- Legal -- Robertson Family	1852-1854, 1856-1861, undated	2	8
Correspondence -- Legal -- Robertson, A. T.	1848	2	9
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Correspondence -- Legal -- Robertson, A. T.	1854	3	2
Correspondence -- Legal -- Robertson, A. T.	1855	3	3
Correspondence -- Legal -- Robertson, A. T.	1856	3	4
Correspondence -- Legal -- Robertson, A. T.	1857	3	5
Correspondence -- Legal -- Robertson, A. T.	1858	3	6
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Correspondence -- Legal -- Robertson, A. T. and J. R.	1860-1862, undated	4	1
Correspondence -- Legal -- Robertson, C. S.	1860	4	2
Correspondence -- Legal -- Robertson, J. R.	1858-1861	4	3
Correspondence -- Legal -- Robertson, Wm. R.	1850	4	4
Correspondence -- Military -- Robertson, A. T.	1853	4	5
Correspondence -- Personal	1838, 1851- 1854, 1857, 1859, 1862, 1872, 1940, undated	4	6
Correspondence -- Personal -- Outgoing -- Robertson, A. T.	1842	4	7
Correspondence -- Personal -- Robertson Family	1850, 1853- 1855, 1857, 1859-1862	4	8
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Correspondence -- Personal -- Robertson, A. T.	1852-1857, 1859-1862, undated	4	10
Correspondence -- Personal -- Robertson, C. S.	1850, 1859	4	11
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Financial materials -- Receipts -- Robertson, Elizabeth	1856	6	2

Financial materials -- Receipts -- Robertson, J. R.	1859-1861	6	3
Financial materials -- Receipts -- Robertson, Patrick F.	1855	6	4
Financial materials -- Receipts -- Robertson, W. R.	1842, 1848, 1855, 1857	6	5
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Legal materials -- Deed of trust	1849	6	13
Legal materials -- Memoranda and notes	1850, 1856, undated	6	14
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Legal materials -- Notices	1846, 1850- 1853, 1855- 1856, 1858- 1863, undated	6	16
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